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Washington State Senate

1998 LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

20TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT UPDATE FROM SENATOR DAN SWECKER

Dear Friends and Neighbors in the 20th Legislative District:

The 1998 Legislature came to Olympia with specific goals we wished to accomplish and we didn't let the fact that this was a 60-day session get in our way.

With a number of personal tragedies in the news and in our districts, legislators passed several new drunken driving laws reducing the legal blood alcohol level and increasing fines and penalties for those convicted of driving under the influence.

We also increased the emphasis on reading in our schools and in our communities by providing \$17 million in grants to help teachers improve our children's reading skills.

With Endangered Species Act listings threatening much of our state, the Legislature put together a \$24 million package aimed specifically at improving salmon runs. When you add in the many related measures, the total commitment increases to \$36 million. We look forward to working with local restoration groups to improve our environment.

The Legislature worked hard this session to make sure we funded necessary programs without increasing our original two-year budget. In 1997, we approved a budget with the lowest growth in state spending in 25 years. This session, we passed a supplemental budget that held spending within our original budget and set aside more than \$780 million to protect our state from future economic downturns.

Working for you in Olympia is an important part of my life. Included in this newsletter, you will find updates on the issues that came before the Legislature during this last legislative session. You will also learn about some of the projects I am pursuing over the summer in preparation for the 1999 session. Thank you for allowing me to serve you.

Sincerely,

Sen. Dan Swecker
R-Rochester

Inside:

- Budgeting for a solid future
- Reducing the burden on Washington taxpayers
- Getting tough on drunken drivers
- Room for everyone in reading improvement
- A serious commitment to saving salmon
- Helping dairies meet clean water standards
- Protecting industry and workers from medical waste problems
- Local control on tribal hunting policy
- New options for jail overcrowding



Budgeting For A Solid Future

In November 1993, voters approved Initiative 601 to put our state on a spending diet. Working families were tired of watching government continue to grow as their paychecks continued to shrink.

Since then, I've watched with pride as our state agencies found innovative ways to do more with less. Last session, the Legislature was able to approve a budget reflecting the lowest growth in state spending in 25 years.

This session, we came to Olympia with specific limits on supplemental spending requests. Due to a strong economy and savings from other programs, this was the first time the Legislature had revenue available, but did not increase spending beyond our original \$19 billion two-year budget.

What does this mean to you? It means we were able to set aside more than \$780 million for the state's "rainy day" account to prevent the need to raise taxes in case of a future economic downturn. It also means we were able to continue cutting taxes for the families and businesses in our state.

Reducing The Burden On Washington Taxpayers

Throughout my years in office, I have found one issue that touches everyone in the 20th District: taxes! In every session since 1994, the Legislature has made tax reduction a top priority. Because of this, taxes are nearly \$1.1 billion lower for families and businesses in our state!

Last session, I sponsored a property tax reduction proposal that voters approved at the November election. This session, the Legislature continued its work to reduce taxes for the working families in our state by proposing a \$30 per vehicle reduction in your license tab fees. We also propose reducing the tax rate on new vehicles after one year instead of the current two years.

These proposals will be included in the comprehensive transportation package, Referendum 49, which will appear on the November ballot. These proposals will reduce taxes in our state by another \$257 million.

1998 LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Alternatives To The School Levy

By the time this newsletter reaches you, many of you will have cast your votes on recent local school levies. Luckily these levies passed. I support the need for a steady stream of funding for our schools rather than relying on these excess levy votes every two years.

Throughout the summer, I am continuing my efforts to reduce property taxes by replacing excess levies with a reliable source of local funding. My proposal would return a portion of the regular state property taxes earmarked for schools back to the local districts and eventually phase out the local school levy altogether. This proposal could reduce property taxes statewide while ensuring adequate funding for our children's education.

Getting Tough On Drunken Drivers

Almost all of us know a friend or loved one who has been devastated by the tragedy of drunken driving. In the three counties making up the 20th District, a total of 46 families lost a loved one due to drunken driving in 1996.

This session, the Legislature took steps to make our state a national leader in drunken driving prevention by:

- Lowering the legal blood alcohol level from 0.10 to 0.08.
- Imposing a 90-day administrative license suspension for first-time drunken driving offenders;
- Requiring ignition interlock devices on the vehicles of repeat drunken drivers to prevent their cars from starting if the device senses alcohol on their breath;
- Limiting to once in a lifetime the ability to avoid prosecution by agreeing to enter a counseling program; and
- Changing the "five-year washout" period whereby prior drunken driving convictions are removed from the offender's record after five years to keep the offense on record for seven years.

20th District Dairies Take Proactive Approach

In early 1997, the dairy industry took a beating in the media after the federal Environmental Protection Agency found violations at several dairies in Northwest Washington.

Southwest Washington dairymen joined with representatives of the Washington State Dairy Federation to bring a proactive proposal to the Legislature. Ross McMahan from Randle and Del Cisco from Morton traveled to Olympia to testify in support of my bill which would have allowed dairy farmers four options in registering with the state Department of Ecology. Dairy operators could also choose not to register, risking increased inspections as a tradeoff.

As the bill made its way through the process, it was changed to require all dairy farms to:

- Develop a dairy nutrient plan; and
- Undergo inspections at least once every two years.

Any fines levied against dairies for violating clean water laws are deposited into a new account to be used solely for helping local conservation districts work with dairies to bring them into compliance.

Although not everyone is pleased with the final outcome of this legislation, I am hopeful that the proactive approach we've taken to police ourselves will preempt any efforts by the federal government to come in and take over.

1998 LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Taking Responsibility For Our Resources

Over the past year, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has listed several species of salmon as either threatened or endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Most recently, NMFS proposed a threatened listing for the Puget Sound Chinook salmon. The Department of Fish and Wildlife says proposed protection for endangered salmon or steelhead now covers three-quarters of the state.

Since the listings started last fall, I have served as co-chair on a special legislative committee seeking solutions to our state's salmon problems. This session, we approved a salmon restoration package and several other related bills directing close to \$36 million toward projects and plans to save the salmon.

Throughout the session, I was frustrated by accounts of mismanagement and waste at the federal level. This summer, I will take part in a regional rivers alliance with representatives from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana to coordinate state-level activities and ensure we are all working in a cooperative manner.

The Legislature made a conscious effort to retain local control of fish restoration projects. We're counting on local groups to work with the state because we believe the citizens of Washington know the best ways to manage our resources.



Sen. Dan Swecker, co-chairman of the Legislature's Salmon Restoration Task Force, was a popular speaker on environmental issues. Early in the session, he spoke with the Department of Ecology's Jim Pendowski and Delores Mitchell at an Environmental Excellence Workshop at St. Martin's Pavilion. He plans to visit a number of groups throughout the interim to discuss salmon restoration in Washington.

20th District Leads By Example In Salmon Restoration

I have been especially impressed with efforts in the 20th District. With much hard work and dedication, citizens of Southwest Washington convinced the Legislature to approve a bill creating a pilot program to address steelhead recovery within an area known as evolutionarily significant unit 4 (ESU 4).

The newly-created SW Washington Regional ESU 4 Management Board is working with Cowlitz Volunteers, formerly known as Fish 1 for Cowlitz County, on restoration projects on the Cowlitz River and Fish First, a group focusing on the Lewis River. Volunteer Coordinator Rich Kolb says the board is also working with a group on the Washougal River.

Protecting Industry And Workers From Medical Waste Problems

Many of you are familiar with a recent case in Morton where three workers at a medical waste treatment plant contracted tuberculosis and 13 others were exposed to the disease. This case brought attention to the possible need for stronger health and safety laws concerning the treatment of medical waste.

Nationally, at least 15 other states regulate medical waste disposal. In Washington, this duty falls to the counties and only 10 of our 39 counties even address this issue.

The chairman of the Senate Agriculture and Environment Committee has asked me to lead the committee in studying this issue to determine whether or not our state should adopt new standards. The first meeting on this issue was held on April 28. We will continue studying this problem throughout the summer and make recommendations to the Legislature in time for the 1999 session.

Local Control Of Tribal Hunting Policy

In early April, the state Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted a formal policy on tribal hunting which calls for cooperation between the state and the tribes to manage hunting in Washington.

Treaties allow tribal members to hunt off-reservation under regulations developed by the individual tribes. A recent state court decision expanded the privilege by ruling that tribal hunting may take place on most state and federal lands and industrial forest lands.

I've heard from several folks in the 20th District who are concerned about this new policy. Because of this, I propose creating regional "big game management councils," made up of local people. I think all users, tribal and non-tribal alike, have a common interest in keeping our game animals healthy and plentiful. I plan to introduce a pilot project to test this proposal when the Legislature reconvenes in January 1999.



New Options For Jail Overcrowding

Over the past several years, citizens have demanded tougher sentences for criminals in our state. Unfortunately, these tougher sentencing tactics have resulted in more and more criminals in our jails and prisons.

Over the summer, I will be working with state law enforcement groups to study this problem and come up with workable solutions. We need to guarantee that the laws we pass are credible deterrents by making sure:

- We have the law enforcement officers necessary to enforce them;
- We have room in our courts to hear these cases; and
- We have space in our jails and prisons to house these criminals once they are convicted.



Room For Everyone In Reading Improvement

The people of the 20th District place a high priority on our children and our schools. Reading is the key to learning and there's nothing more satisfying than helping your children or grandchildren learn to read. That's why I joined in introducing "The Successful Readers Act."

This bill creates two voluntary grant programs to help improve students' reading scores. The first program provides roughly \$9 million for teachers in kindergarten through second grade for additional training and instructional materials. The second gives elementary schools about \$8 million in grants to help teachers train volunteer tutors and mentors for children from kindergarten through the sixth grade.

Local school districts are not required to participate. It's up to your local school districts to make the decision to apply for these grants and start these new reading programs. Then it's up to all of us to volunteer to take the time to help a child open the door to the world of reading.

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